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THE BRITISH DRAMA LEAGUE
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DRAMA

MARCH MCMXXVI

THE JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH DRAMA LEAGUE

THE BEST PLAYS OF FEBRUARY

According to Herbert Farjeon

IN writing of the best plays produced during any given month a critic should, I suppose, first come to an understanding with himself and with his readers as to what it is that makes one play better than another. Comparison is easy when we are concerned merely with quantity. But by what common measure shall we assess quality?

Here is "The Forcing House" and here "The Firebrand"—an incomparable pair: but to omit either from this catalogue of "best plays" must be to suggest that one is better than the other. The only measure, in such a dilemma, is the measure of one's personal satisfaction. Having been moderately entertained by Mr. Mayer's drivelling travesty of Benvenuto Cellini, I shall be something of a hypocrite if I set it down as inferior to Mr. Zangwill's cumbrous politico-poetico-psychologico-Heaven-knows-whatco revolutionary drama. Most of my critical colleagues would, I suspect, commend "The Forcing House" as the best new play of the month; but to me it appears to suffer from mental congestion, and if I prefer "Mr. Abdulla" at the Playhouse, I do so because I cannot participate in the modern deification of the mind. A good laugh, like a good cry, is far more salutary in the theatre than a good think. What I demand first of an artist is that he shall make me feel.

Tchegov is not a mental playwright, and it is because he appeals to the sad heart rather than to the heavy mind of man that he may one day win popularity even in the London Coliseum. Thanks to the persistence of Mr. Philip Ridgeway, Tchegov is

slowly but surely being discovered by the groundlings, who could choose last month between "Uncle Vanya" at the Duke of York's and "The Three Sisters" at the Barnes. These are tragic plays, imbued with the sweetness of sympathy. Is there a character in Tchegov who cannot be recognized as one of life's failures clinging for consolation, as we all cling, to some wild hope—the hope of a millennium, the hope that life may, after all, be itself a mere figment of the imagination, the hope that all our troubles will miraculously vanish to-morrow, when we leave the dreariness of the country for the busy hum of Moscow? Tchegov touches the heart, stirring us like a delicate wind stirring the strings of some abandoned harp.

There was a Shakespeare revival in the West End, where Mr. Henry Ainley presented "Much Ado About Nothing" at the New; but this was a spiritless production, savouring of late Victorianism, and Mr. Ainley's Benedick was merely graceful skimming. Miss Madge Titheradge's Beatrice was beautifully spoken, and lacked nothing but the spectacular quality one demands of a romantic heroine. The most moving Shakespearean performance of the month was Miss Edith Evans's Portia in an excellent revival of "Julius Cæsar" at the Old Vic.

Two farces of inferior quality were deemed by the skill of the principal performers. Mr. Lynne Overman, in "The Hottentot," made the best of a supply of second-rate dialogue by demonstrating how amusing a skilful comedian may become when he is inarticulate. In "Is Zat So?"

THE BEST PLAYS OF FEBRUARY

Mr. James Gleason and Mr. Robert Armstrong reintroduced the art of cross-talk, and showed what a fine art it may become in the mouths of experts. "Is Zat So?" seems to have been the commercial hit of February, although I am told that it is hard pressed by "The Firebrand," thanks to the Lewis Waller-like popularity of Mr. Ivor Novello—still, histrionically, a bit of a Peter Pan.

Of the musical pieces, half a dozen in all, only one can lay claim to any kind of distinction. This is "Mr. Pepys," with which

the new management at the Everyman made a successful start. Mr. Pepys himself must have been a pretty shrewd, hard-working fellow, and not nearly such a nincompoop as he appears in this little entertainment. But Mr. Clifford Bax, the author, Mr. Martin Shaw, the composer, and Mr. Allan Wade, the producer, have contrived an effective mock-Restoration production of the heel-toe-away-we-go variety, which might fittingly have been entitled, in acknowledgment of its parentage, "The Diarist's Opera."

"THE THEATRE RENTS BOGEY"

An Interview with Mr. Walter Payne

THE tale of how the theatre is woefully crippled by exorbitant rents has been so persistently dinned into our heads, that it is refreshing to hear a very different view from Mr. Walter Payne, who, as President of the Society of West End Managers, can speak with vastly more authority than the majority of those who paint us lurid pictures of money-grubbing profiteers shovelling preposterous sums into their pockets. Mr. Payne holds, firstly, that the non-production or failure of good plays, or as often alleged of the theatre as a commercial concern is not due to rentals; secondly, that the rentals charged are not unreasonably high.

The evidence on which statements about theatre rents are based is very often flimsy and inaccurate. One case, remarked Mr. Payne, which is often quoted, happens to be substantially true, but it also happens to have been exceptional, and is in any event almost prehistoric. It was the case of a theatre which was taken after the war by a too enthusiastic manager for a short period. Again, from time to time considerable prominence is given in the Press to the statements of apparently responsible persons that they prefer to play in the provinces or abroad because of the high rentals demanded in the West End. "What they do not state, however, is that they could not pay any rent at all for any theatre if they were to present in the West End of London the old plays with the casts with

which they are able to satisfy a provincial or colonial audience, less sophisticated and less blasé than the average audience found in a West End theatre." It is wise of them to take their wares to a market where they can command a ready and profitable sale; but why they should excuse a sound policy by bad reasons is a mystery.

"Theatres in the West End of London may be divided roughly into three categories. In the first are those owned or held on long leases by persons or companies who finance the cost of producing and running plays which appear in these theatres. The second category includes theatres which are let on long leases to those who intend to produce plays: what they pay is the market value of the theatre to them at that time, and in turn those people often enter into financial arrangements with other persons or syndicates to produce plays in the theatre. The third category covers those cases where a "rent" is paid based on a percentage of the receipts. The proportions of successes and failures in each of these categories are probably about the same. There are theatres in London held on pre-war rents where successes and failures alternate just as much as in any other theatre. The truth is that a far more frequent cause of failure than the rent paid is the play itself—which fails to attract a sufficient number of the public to make it a paying proposition, and this would be the case if half the amount of rental, or even no rental at all, was paid."

"THE THEATRE RENTS BOGEY"

Dealing with the actual sums charged as rentals, Mr. Payne pointed out that too often the people who condemn them as excessive, overlook the fact that the rent paid includes the rates and many of the unavoidable standing charges which every theatre has to pay in the course of a year. These have doubled since 1914, and are a great tax on buildings unable to increase their capacity except by raising their prices of admission, which, to any material degree, has been found impracticable.

"Another fact which has to be taken into consideration is that the rent which may be paid for a few weeks is based on the privilege of taking the theatre for a few weeks only, and limiting the risk, instead of taking it on a long tenure involving a greater liability. The analogy is that of a furnished house, which a person may take for a particular season, and for his own particular purpose. It is immaterial to him whether the house is occupied or not during the rest of the year."

"Lastly, the owners or lessees of theatres are not such fools as to ask for their theatres sums which make it commercially impossible for the producing manager to make money with a success. The majority of West End theatres, even closed, cost anything from £5,000 to £10,000 per annum to keep up. This sum is accounted for by ground rents, which on the whole are low and were fixed many years ago; by the rates and taxes, which are now very high; by repairing, renovating, heating, insurance, and nucleus staff; by sinking fund premiums; by interest on the capital or the construction of the premises—and so forth. From this it follows that when letting or sharing, the owner has to cover these charges, to provide for a reserve against periods when theatres are often closed for many weeks, and if possible set aside a reserve—as in any other business—out of which to meet very probable future losses or crises that may have to be surmounted."

A SWEDISH PLAY-GOERS' ASSOCIATION

By Horace Fleming

THE Amateur Theatre has never really taken root in Sweden. It is to be found here and there in the country, but there is no movement comparable to that which is so widespread in England. The best Amateur Societies are at Gothenburg and in a few industrial towns like Norrköping; but amongst the mining and lumber centres of the north, the travelling professional companies are most popular.

The most interesting enterprise in connexion with the drama in Sweden, however, is "Skådebanan," an Association of Playgoers. It functions both as a producer of high-class drama for the workers and as an agency for the sale of tickets for the regular theatres at reduced prices to its members.

Founded in May, 1910, it is a joint stock concern, with shareholders drawn mainly from Trade Unions and Temperance Societies. In Stockholm its chief activity lies in purchasing large blocks of tickets for certain performances at selected theatres, notably the two Royal Theatres which are

subsidized by the State, and disposing of these at the lowest practicable price to members of its organization.

These consist of 3,000 to 5,000 annual subscribers, confined to persons of limited income. Particulars as to income and number of family have to be supplied on a special form by each applicant for an "Annual Ticket." Each holder of an "Annual Ticket" is entitled to purchase two seats for each performance given in co-operation with Skådebanan, and each Skådebanan production.

The Association issues regularly to its members a publication giving particulars of forthcoming performances and the days on which tickets for these are to be sold. It also contains a list of the performers, photographs, articles and notes about the plays. Tickets are procurable on the days specified at six stalls in different parts of the city, upon presentation and stamping of the Annual Ticket, and also in some of the larger workmen's centres, from representatives of the executive body of Skådebanan.

"THE THEATRE RENTS BOGEY"

The prices charged vary from about thirty to sixty per cent. less than the ordinary theatre prices.

In addition, the Association controls a Summer Theatre, which it rents from the municipality of Stockholm, and where it presents a repertory of old-established popular comedies and farces.

In the provinces the Association functions in co-operation with local popular educational bodies. The Association provides travelling companies giving good modern programmes at the lowest possible prices, while the local organizations intimate their selection from the repertoire and take all financial risks involved in the production.

Each performance is preceded by a lecture dealing with the subject, usually given by some member of the Association. Among the dramatists whose works have been performed quite recently are Strindberg, Holberg, Molière and Bernard Shaw. The utmost possible attention is given to produc-

tion, which is always entrusted to experts.

Over and above all this, the Association sends out a travelling theatrical company every summer, specially equipped for giving performances at festivals, school-feasts, etc. The usual programmes comprise historical drama, comedies of a traditional order, folk-songs and dances. The company travels in its own motor-omnibus.

Like all artistic ventures, Skådebanan has had its times of financial stress, mainly, perhaps, because of a lack of economic sense in the management, for the policy throughout has been to give first consideration to the maintenance of a high artistic ideal. However, it now seems firmly established, and is dependent neither on State, nor Municipal, nor Trade Union subsidies. Perhaps the most striking proof of its success lies in the fact that Skådebanan has been able to produce plays of a high order and has attracted to its banner many of the leading actors and actresses in Sweden.

A FESTIVAL OF COMMUNITY DRAMA

IT will be remembered that at the League's last Conference at Birmingham, not only was it decided to accept the invitation from America that the League should send out a team of Community actors to compete in the New York Little Theatre Tournament, but that the feeling was strongly expressed that we should endeavour to organize a somewhat similar competition in this country if and when means could be found to deal adequately with so ambitious an enterprise.

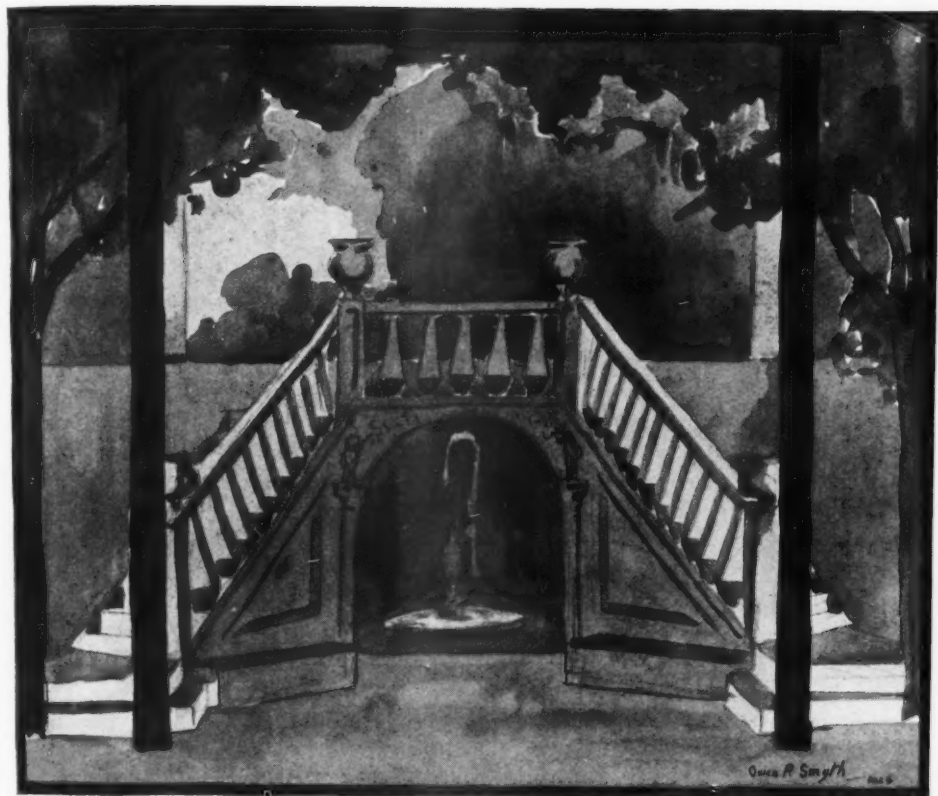
A Committee was nominated to consider the matter, including Mr. F. E. Doran (of Manchester), Miss Elsie Fogerty, Mr. Harold Ridge, Mr. Sharman (of Liverpool), Mr. Purdom (of Letchworth), and Mr. Geoffrey Whitworth. This Committee has drawn up a scheme which has received the sanction of the League's Council, and we are now therefore in a position to announce that the Competition should be held on the basis outlined below.

Our objective is a Festival of Community Plays to be held in London in the early Spring of next year, in time for a team of players to be selected to represent the League at the New York Tournament in

1927. It is clear that out of the large field of amateur societies which might wish to take part in such a Festival, it would be impossible to arrange that every one should give a performance in London. Therefore some method of preliminary elimination is essential.

We propose therefore that local Festivals should be held in six provincial towns central to six geographical areas in England, Scotland and Wales. Productions entered for these Festivals may be visited in their own individual districts by a panel of local judges for the purpose of selecting the three or four productions which are most worthy of presentation at the area Festival. This Festival should be held in each area centre not later than December 15, 1926.

Each of these Area Festivals will take place in a hall or theatre in the central city on a single afternoon or evening, and will be viewed by a judge, nominated by the Council of the British Drama League, with the assistance of the local panel of judges who will act as assessors. One production from each Area will then be selected by the judge as that deemed most worthy to take part in the London Festival to be held, as



DESIGN BY OWEN R. SMYTH FOR THE
SETTING OF "MARRIAGE À LA MODE," AS
PLAYED AT THE Maddermarket Theatre,
NORWICH. ONE SCENE WAS USED
THROUGHOUT, AND WITH NO FRONT
CURTAIN, THE AUDIENCE HAVING A FULL
VIEW OF THE SETTING AS THEY ENTERED
THE THEATRE

A FESTIVAL OF COMMUNITY DRAMA

aforesaid, early in 1927. By this means six plays (one for each of the six areas) will come up for final judgment at the London Festival which will be held publicly in a West End theatre on two consecutive afternoons. Three plays will be performed on each afternoon.

Now, the success of the scheme depends almost entirely on the formation of strong local Committees to take charge of the preliminary local trials and the six Area Festivals. Careful consideration has been given as to the best means of forming these local Committees, and it has been decided that each area should be invited to elect its own Committee at a preliminary meeting open to representatives of all the societies affiliated to the League in each area. For the purpose of convening these preliminary meetings it has been necessary to appoint an Acting Secretary who, pending the election of a permanent Secretary and executive, will, in each area, take the necessary measures for convening the meeting.

The following are the cities which have been chosen as centres of the six areas into which the country has been divided:

London.—South and South East Area.

Bath.—West of England.

Birmingham.—Midlands & South Wales.

Manchester.—Liverpool, Sheffield and North Wales Area.

Leeds.—Yorkshire Area.

Glasgow.—Border and Scottish Area.

It has been the considered policy of the Committee not, at this stage, to define too strictly the details of the scheme either in respect of the preliminary trials, the Area Festivals, or of the Final Festival in London. A few conditions seem, however, definitely indicated.

1. Entrants for the Festival must be amateur bodies in the usual meaning of the word, though a professional and paid producer is allowable.

2. The Dramatic work offered by any entrant must be a One-Act Play or extract from a longer play, but must not in any circumstances exceed forty minutes in performance. The length of the play or extract is not a factor which will be taken into account by the judges.

3. For the London Festival, the Drama League will be financially responsible for providing the theatre, lighting, programmes, and publicity. It will

also provide the London judges (as well as the local Area Judge). Competing Societies or Local Area Committees must be responsible for all other expenses.

4. With regard to the Area Festivals, the expenses of these will be borne locally; but it is suggested that the Area Committees should organize their finances on a similar basis to that adopted for the London Festival, namely, by charging admission to the Festival performances. If adequate interest is aroused among responsible patrons of the drama in each city, it is felt that a sum of money could be raised which should go far to render the local Festival performances and preliminary trials self-supporting.

Although one of the objects of the Festival is to select a Group which might represent the League at the New York Tournament, every Society entering the Festival may not be in a position to visit America even if placed first in the Final Festival. It is, however, understood that any Society successfully reaching the standard of the London Festival would have the option of entering for the New York Tournament, in the order of final selection.

We would add a word as to the spirit in which we are hopeful that the Festival might be conducted.

It will have been noted that throughout the statement of the scheme, the term "Festival" has been used in place of "Competition." This has been done advisedly—not because we are unmindful of the stimulus to artistic achievement which competitions have often secured. The masterpieces of Greek tragedy were the direct outcome of a highly organized system of competitive performances. At the same time there is always a danger that work done in a competitive spirit may be done less for the work's own sake than from the desire for monetary or other rewards. Therefore we prefer to use the word "Festival," to signify not only good sportsmanship out good fellowship too.

The Festival, if it is to succeed according to our hopes, must prove in the first place a means for improvement in the artistic standards of Community Players in general, and in the second place, it must afford an occasion to manifest to many watchful critics of Community Drama what its social value may be.



A SCENE FROM "MOUNTEBANKS," BY
FRANK BIRCH. AS PRODUCED LAST MONTH
AT CAMBRIDGE

THE THEATRE IN SCOTLAND

By Norman Marshall

This article is of special interest in view of the meeting held in Glasgow on Sunday, March 7, at which Mr. Holford Knight addressed an audience of over four thousand people on behalf of the British Drama League. We shall hope to be able to record important developments in the Scottish Theatre as time goes on.

EVERYONE agrees about the dreary state of the theatre in Scotland, but nobody seems to mind. Even those critics most tireless in pillorying the English playgoer for his sins, seldom carry their punitive expeditions across the border. Really, they feel, it would hardly be good form to discuss the theatre with a Scot. Vague legends about the Puritan tradition and churchgoers who disapprove of organs as "kists o' whistles," are tangled up in so many people's minds with mellow old Punch jokes about "elders o' the kirk" and the Scottish Sabbath, that they grow quite sentimentally lenient over the Scotsman's neglect of the theatre. It is all part of a fine, rugged tradition, they think—so charmingly picturesque that they scarcely have the heart to wish it otherwise.

But if this spirit does still exist in Scotland, it is certainly not to be found in the towns. One need only listen to a Glasgow audience grow hysterical over the tawdry vulgarities of some witless farce to realize how little the present generation has inherited from the days when it was held in Scotland that if actors were allowed at large, "vice and obscenity were dreadfully propagated"; so they were accordingly scourged and branded, "to the great pleasure of Almichtie God, and common weill of the realm."

The fact is that the theatre in Scotland is extremely popular—in the degraded sense of the word. For instance, before the war the Edinburgh audience had the reputation of being finely critical. Now it can always be hypnotized by the assurance that the play of the week is yet one more "Great London Success." There are amateur play-producing societies in plenty, but they are too small to achieve anything important. If they joined forces the idea of an Edinburgh repertory theatre might mean more than an interminable beating of drums. But Edinburgh continues to live up to her reputation

of being "cold, cliqué and suspicious." Besides, the literary-minded are all so terribly busy organizing lectures and excursions and competitions and bazaars to keep the memory of R. L. Stevenson bright—almost vulgarly bright. They have no time to interest themselves in the theatre.

Glasgow is more fortunate. Glasgow has the Scottish National Players. Whether she deserves them is another matter.

Actors believe that a Glasgow audience is the best in the land. But it is merely indiscriminately and monotonously enthusiastic. Those who are fond of talking about the "dourness" of Glasgow, would have been startled, during the recent run of a musical comedy, to see the theatre guarded by police—a precaution rendered necessary by the attempts of excited playgoers to storm the doors. It is with the same hysterical enthusiasm that the same crowds flock one week to a musical comedy, next week to see a fine player in a fine play, and the week after that to clap some popular actor posturing his way through a jerry-built piece run up for a season and labelled "prior to London production." But one would have thought that the clannishness of the Scots temperament would ensure reasonable support for the Scottish National Players when they occasionally break the monotonous succession of "London successes" at the principal theatre by appearing in a play such as John Brandane's Highland comedy, "The Glen is Mine." However, Glasgow is only very slowly beginning to discover that good drama need not necessarily be manufactured in London.

The aims of the Scottish National Theatre Society are, briefly, "to develop Scottish national drama, to encourage in Scotland a public taste for drama of any type, to found a Scottish National Theatre." Since its foundation in 1921 the Society has given nearly 400 performances in towns and villages all over Scotland and made a tour of some of the English towns, including

THE THEATRE IN SCOTLAND

Manchester. The Players, who are mainly amateurs working under a professional producer, have produced forty-four different plays, thirty-six for the first time on any stage. A considerable number of these have, of course, been in one act, and some of the early ones were conventional and undistinguished, but the general standard has steadily improved. The plays are not, as might be feared, oppressively Scottish. The Reading Committee of the Society "is not seeking for plays of the kailyard school, nor for pieces modelled on 'Rob Roy' or 'Crammond Brig,' nor for conventional caricatures of the 'pawky' Scot such as we have grown accustomed to see upon the English stage; it does not hunger after dialect, nor thirst particularly for 'but-and-ben' atmosphere or room-and-kitchen squalor. Its aim is to present in dramatic form the real life of Scotland, past and present, of every grade and shade, from every angle."

After four years' work the Players have to their credit at least half a dozen plays which are unusually fine pieces of work, and most of these would certainly never have been written had the Scottish Players not existed. The dramatist is the one kind of artist who cannot work without a reasonable expectation of a public.

Easily the best and most representative of the comedies which have been the result of these five years' work is John Brandane's "The Glen is Mine." Among the verse plays are the first performance of Gordon Bottomley's "Gruach," and Robert Bain's chronicle play, "James the First of Scotland," the finest and most ambitious work that the Players have produced. Until recently there was no full length tragedy of any great value, with the possible exception of another of Brandane's plays, "The Lifting"; although George Blake's "The Mother," in one act, has some claim to be considered alongside J. A. Ferguson's "Campbell of Kilmhor," perhaps the finest of all one-act tragedies. But, at the beginning of the year the Players gave one more proof of the sincerity of their aims by producing, in the teeth of considerable opposition, George Reston Malloch's grimly realistic tragedy, "Soutarnass Water." It has been described as "a slice of life, raw and reeking," with "the strength of

sheer ugliness"; but on the other hand Gordon Bottomley declares that it is "probably the most important and significant thing that has happened in Scottish literature since 'The House with the Green Shutters,'" and it is much better than that because it is less predominately sensational."

The ultimate aim of the Scottish National Theatre Society is to build a theatre of its own, but the failure of the old Glasgow Repertory Theatre lies across the path. The Glasgow business man is quite willing to support artistic schemes if he feels satisfied that they are good business as well as good art, but since the failure of the Repertory Theatre he has become convinced that for Glasgow to have its own company of players in a theatre of its own is both unpractical and idealistic, so the scheme is at present starved for lack of support.

On the other hand the Scottish National Theatre Society owes its very existence to the interest created by the Repertory Theatre, with its magnificent list of fine plays finely produced. But it was in no real sense a Scottish theatre, for during its whole lifetime "Campbell of Kilmhor" was the solitary Scottish play of any importance which it produced. But now the fact that Scotland has a growing sum of money set aside for the foundation of its National Theatre, shows that the scheme has already passed far beyond mere talk.

The Cadby Hall Section of the Lyons' Club Dramatic Society gave two performances at the Club Pavilion Theatre at Sudbury, in December last, of Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion." The play was produced for the society by Miss Elsie Fogerty, L.R.A.M., of the School of Dramatic Art, and was a great success. In February the same section produced three one-act plays, namely, "Overruled," by Bernard Shaw, "The Twelve Pound Look," by Barrie, and "Hallmarked," by John Galsworthy. These three plays were produced by members of the society. The next main production of the section takes place at the Pavilion, Sudbury, on April 16 and 17, when the "Manceuvres of Jane," by H. A. Jones, is being produced by Miss Fogerty.

We would remind members of the League that the Library at 8 Adelphi Terrace is open on Wednesday and Thursday evenings until nine o'clock.

BRITISH DRAMA LEAGUE NOTES



THE JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH DRAMA LEAGUE

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Neither the Editor nor the Drama League as a whole accepts any responsibility for the opinions expressed in signed articles printed in this Journal.

THE meeting called to consider the question of Advance Booking for pit and gallery seats duly met at 8 Adelphi Terrace on Monday, March 1, but failed to come to any agreement. Mr. St. John Ervine forcibly set out the arguments against the "Queue," fortified by a pile of over three thousand "Anti-Queue" post cards, the result of the *Observer* and *Daily Mail* plebiscite. Only some forty post cards favoured the opposite view, a view which was held, however, by the representatives of the three playgoers' societies—which were represented at the meeting. The four theatre managers present showed a very open mind, but none of them was willing, in present circumstances, to come out definitely in favour of advanced booking. This was owing mainly to two considerations. Firstly, the difficulty and expense involved in selling tickets in advance. Secondly, the probability that the purpose of the change would be defeated by the tendency of those who now

book upper circle and even dress circle seats to try first for the pit.

Many of our readers will have been following with interest the correspondence which has been appearing in the *Daily Telegraph*, on relations between the amateur and professional stage. Mr. Reginald Bach and other writers on the professional side, assert that professional Touring Companies find themselves seriously damaged by performances of amateurs which are given in theatres just before or after the visit of the Touring Company. There are hints of a proposal from the Stage Guild by which a voluntary tax shall be paid by all amateurs, the proceeds of which will be devoted to furthering the work of the Guild. We shall doubtless have more to say on this topic on some future occasion. Meanwhile it is clearly the business of the Drama League and its members to take no hasty action which shall endanger the good relations hitherto existing between the professional and the amateur stage.

The selection of the team to represent the Drama League in the New York Little Theatre Tournament next May will have been completed by the time this number of the magazine is in the hands of our readers. We are glad to announce that Lord Burnham has allowed the *Daily Telegraph* to be responsible for the selection, and Mr. W. A. Darlington, the dramatic critic of that paper, has been visiting the performances of the seven societies who have entered for the competition. The result is to be announced in a special article by Mr. Darlington, which will appear in the *Daily Telegraph* of Thursday, March 18.

We must record here our regret for the death of Sir Sidney Lee, a good friend of the Drama League, and one of the most distinguished Shakespearean scholars of his generation. The "Life of Shakespeare" is a work which will secure its writer's memory in the minds of students and lovers of Shakespeare for many years to come. His death marks the close of a notable era of Elizabethan scholarship and criticism.

THE MONTH'S BOOK LIST

Trifles. By Susan Glaspell. *The Mulligatawny Medallion.* By Barrington Gates. Benn. 7s. 6d. and 3s. 6d.

Dance Drama. By Terence Gray Heffer. 5s.

Good Men and True. By Alban Gordon. *Edward about to Marry.* By F. Sladen-Smith. *The Wooing O't.* By W. D. Cocker. Gowans and Gray. 1s. each.

Which? By Henry Bowskill. Daniel. 3s. 6d.

THE future of the one-act play is in the keeping of the amateur companies. It is the one important field of drama in which the amateur can do original work of a kind unattempted in the professional theatre, and one of the most important and definite results of the growth of intelligent amateur acting is the steady improvement in both the quality and quantity of the one-act plays which are published. The batch of plays under review are a more than usually emphatic instance of this.

The play which provides the title for Miss Susan Glaspell's book is an exquisitely poised and perfectly finished piece of work, with something of the delicately spun pathos of "Bernice" and with the same still beauty of atmosphere. The other "serious plays" in the book are made to look very limp by comparison, but the two comedies written in collaboration with George Cram Cook are hugely entertaining. "Intellectual farces" would be a better name for them, as they are written with a breadth and gusto which oversteps the bounds of comedy, but at the same time they caper with devastating effect upon humbug and cant. Even the most timid and unenterprising company, which has hitherto clung to the safely threadbare type of slip-slap farce, may embark upon these two plays without a tremor. They will certainly prove quite as safely funny as the most reliable of "rollicking farces"; and besides, the actors will be able to enjoy the satisfactory feeling of having performed the plays of at least one great dramatist—which ought to have an excellent effect upon their artistic self-respect.

It is unfortunate that Mr. Gates's book leads off with a comedy very like any other of those neatly turned and politely amusing one-act plays so "specially suitable for amateurs," as the other four plays have an invigorating tang of originality about them. To some tastes they may seem a little too full-flavoured, but we prefer to thank heaven for a book of one-act plays with "body" in them.

Mr. Gray's book is to be recommended to anybody interested in the drama, however little he may be interested in the dance, because both in precept and practice the book drives home a principle, a principle that cannot be repeated too often—that in the theatre people are as eager to see as to hear. Any producer with imagination will find these dance-dramas teeming with ideas for new settings and groupings, and there is plenty of food for thought in the coloured illustrations showing the use of luminous coloured screens. The plays themselves, mercifully free from the anæmic vagueness which usually afflicts this type of drama, have an effectiveness which is "theatrical" in the true sense of the word.

"Good Men and True" is a florid melodrama in a jury-room. All the characters roll their tongues

round high-sounding phrases with real melodramatic relish. It is a relief to turn from this crudely coloured piece of work to Mr. Sladen-Smith's high-stepping farce. Not only has he made full use of the opportunities of farce for fantastic situations, but he has used a style which is in itself farcical, quite apart from the meaning of the words. Sentences are danced about with a joyous disregard for reality, but at the same time according to a fantastic pattern, until the play seems to move with all the gay precision of a ballet. As to "The Wooing O't"—well, we began to read it rather doubtfully, with weary recollections of all those one-act Scots comedies which strive so painstakingly for "pawkinsness." But this turned out to be an exception, a thoroughly likeable little play in which the characters are normal people instead of "so delightfully quaint," as usually happens in this type of play, and the dialect succeeds in being at the same time natural and picturesque.

Lastly, a solitary full-length play. "Which?" is so frankly propaganda, first and last, that it is hardly possible to consider it from any other point of view. However, it may possibly prove useful to a society anxious to combine a little pacifist propaganda with an opportunity to give all the actors a chance by means of a play with a huge cast.

The Modern Ibsen. By Hermann J. Weigand. Dent. 15s.

The Comic Spirit in Restoration Drama. By Henry T. E. Perry. Milford. 9s.

Dramatic Theory in Spain. Edited by H. J. Chaytor. Cambridge University Press. 3s. 6d.

The Plot Concerns—. By Joseph Kaye and Burr Coe. Putnam. 7s. 6d.

Mr. Weigand has attempted a "creative interpretation" of twelve of Ibsen's plays by taking each one in turn and analysing it scrupulously. It is a scheme which could only be saved from tediousness by a brilliance of thought and style completely lacking in this book.

To write a book about the Restoration dramatists in order to prove the superiority of Molière seems an unnecessarily roundabout method of literary criticism, but this appears to have been Mr. Perry's somewhat irritating aim. Nevertheless, a book well worth reading.

Mr. Chaytor has gathered together a number of passages from Spanish literature (printed in the original) which have hitherto not been easily accessible, illustrating current dramatic theories in Spain immediately before and during the "siglo de oro." There is a swift introduction, only a few pages in length, which is admirably done.

"The Plot Concerns—" tells the story of a dozen recent plays which "have won both critical favour and long runs" in America. These are of the type of "Dancing Mothers," "White Cargo" and "Expressing Willie," so the full list provides some valuable clues for solving the mystery of "the popular taste." But that, we suspect, was hardly the primary reason for the publication of this astonishing parody of "Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare."

N. M.

THE THEATRE OF THE PAST

A Causerie Conducted by Allardyce Nicoll

I SHOULD have liked to begin this month's causerie with some pretty little Latin mottoes about times changing, so pass the glories of the world, and the like, for I have before me Mr. Erroll Sherson's entertaining volume on *London's Lost Theatres of the Nineteenth Century* (John Lane, 18s. net); and Mr. Sherson has such a delightful classic pessimism when he thinks of dull Kingsway in place of notorious bagnios and evil-smelling old-clothes shops round Wych Street, of duller flats in place of decent Victorian mansions, of players of to-day in place of players of yesterday.

Mr. Sherson lives in the world peopled by Keans and Terrys and Matthews and Vestris and Menkens, and has precious little use for the theatre of to-day. Personally—I may be wrong, for these are but names to the present generation—I think I rather prefer Shaw and Barrie and Ervine and the vast concourse of modern playwrights to the Fitzballs and the Boucicaults of the past. The bloody old melodrama may have been heart-stirring; the equestrian performances at Astley's may have been all that was delightful; it may have been pleasant to consume port wine at the Eagle, with its shows of "dazzling excitement"; but, after all, the brightness must have been tinselly at the best, and the delight superficial and external.

The only quarrel I have, indeed, with Mr. Sherson is that he tends to underrate the productions of the present-day theatre because he is so immersed in the theatre of the past; but I realize, at the same time, that Mr. Sherson's book could not have been what it is—a delightful account of Victorian theatrical enterprise—had he not written it in this spirit of sad melancholy and calmly classic despair. We read here of lost theatres, remembered and forgotten. We read of the well-known Princess's and Sadler's Wells, and we read of the wholly vanished Grecian Saloon, Bower Saloon and Imperial Theatre. And what an activity in all of these! Constant pantomimes and melodramas and spectacles and dramatized novels; constant changes of management

and of cast; constant bickerings over parts, and mishaps and successes; hopes, tears, despairs, jealousies—a little lost world of its own, akin to, and yet alien from, the apparently more dignified productions in the Drury Lanes and St. Martin's of to-day. This is a period in which I, too, am interested, for it is out of these interminable struggles and heart-burnings that the modern theatre was born. I do not look upon it wistfully as a golden age to which there can be no return, but, although our orientation differ sadly, I can imagine no better guide to the period than that provided by Mr. Sherson. At any rate, we are indebted to him for that rare thing, a history with a soul; he has set these gay figures dancing and leaping and mouthing it once more, and we sit contentedly watching them with Mr. Sherson in the stalls.

Mr. Sherson's book might well be supplemented by a study of the nearly lost theatres—Sadler's Wells, which public subscription is saving in our midst, and the Old Vic, once the Coburg, the story of which has been well told by Cicely Hamilton and Lilian Baylis (Jonathan Cape, 12s. 6d. net). More than once the Old Vic. nearly vanished, but it has been preserved at last as the chief theatre south of the river. All must rejoice at its presence in theatrical London, for, while the over-warm assertions of some critics that here Shakespeare is put forward under ideal conditions are worthy only of a smile, we cannot forget that through the activities of the Old Vic. we have been privileged to see plays which otherwise could have been read only in the study.

We must note, however, that the Old Vic., though gained, has passed far from the traditions described by Mr. Sherson, for here "legitimacy" rears its august head, and the majority of the lost theatres revelled, in more ways than one, in illegitimacy. A charming world, albeit Bohemian, but perhaps—with all due deference to Mr. Sherson—better lost than preserved, better imaginatively re-visualized in Mr. Sherson's pages than frequented in actuality.



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STANDARDS IN VILLAGE DRAMA

By Mary Kelly

ONE of the main difficulties of the village producer's task is to induce his players to set themselves a high standard in their dramatic work. Their accustomed audience, being composed mainly of intimate friends, is too readily appreciative; having come very largely for the pleasure of seeing familiar faces in unfamiliar dress, and having enjoyed that pleasure to the full, it is warm in its praise of the performance. "Mr. Martin, he was the right man in the right place, sure enough; and us was highly well pleased with Parson, he was a proper comic," and so on, till the actors, too, are highly well pleased with themselves. The contrary opinions, being rather personal than dramatic, are discounted as serious criticism.

Village players have little chance of seeing other people act. They are rarely visited by other bands, owing to the cost of transport; only the keenest of them will go to see the plays in other villages; and for the large majority the professional theatre can hardly be said to exist. Consequently, although they are naturally quite diffident to begin with about their own powers, these powers are often checked in their growth by self-satisfaction.

The Women's Institutes, knowing this danger for artistic enterprise in the country, have been doing their utmost to raise the general standard by competitions and exhibitions, and for the past few years have organized dramatic competitions among their members, which are already having a marked effect on the dramatic work of the institutes. Generally the scenes chosen for these competitions have been from Shakespeare, but a few counties have taken other plays as well. The interest and enthusiasm aroused by these competitions is most remarkable, and we hope that they may be seeds of far bigger things. At present they are almost always confined to members of the W.I., which precludes the men and also the children from taking part; but it is to be hoped that before very long the W.I. will join with other village players in organizing open competitions which will include bands from any village and from the

schools as well. Last autumn a small festival of this sort was arranged by a group of branches of the Village Drama Society, which had the market town of Tavistock as their mutual centre. It was noticeable that in this festival the male actors outnumbered the women, which helps to disprove the theory held by some gloomy persons that the men of the villages will never be induced to act; there was also a class for children. The organization of such a festival is not overwhelmingly difficult, and the value of it to the actors is very great indeed. Many such small festivals might easily be held all over the country, and the larger county festivals might grow out of them. The Village Drama Society has long been anxious to promote these and has given the matter careful consideration. It has drawn up a fully suggestive syllabus of scenes and classes of different types that might be included in the competitions, and has now an excellent panel of adjudicators and speakers.

I have used the term festivals because I think that the chance of success for these is really greater if the purely competitive element is left out. If the bands are graded according to merit they still get the excitement of competition, without the feeling of rather bitter rivalry that is often aroused among villages. Village loyalty is very strong, and is a valuable help to the producer; but village antagonism, usually most bitter among next-door neighbours, is of very little value. In these competitions it is apt to rise to the surface, as may be discovered sometimes by a person sitting in the audience. "We don't care who wins, so long as Milton des'n't." . . . "I don't know why it is, but I always hate Newton to win, don't you?"

As regards the criticism, it is important that adjudicators should not mark too highly, or be too kind. It is the players' one chance in the year of reasonable, expert criticism, and, if their producer has prepared them for it, they do enjoy quite drastic treatment. Naturally, every good critic will point out the merits of a performance, but the village players really like to hear what their faults are.

NEWS FROM NORTH AND SOUTH

THE Maddermarket Theatre, NORWICH

The Norwich Players began their present season last September with Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure." This they followed in October by Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler." The latter play was dressed Mid-Victorian and was played on an open stage, without proscenium or curtain—a method which the Players have found so successful. The intimacy between actor and audience and the ease and speed of action are one of the distinctive features of the Maddermarket, directly due to the banishment of the proscenium and its accessories. "Hedda Gabler" attracted a good deal of attention locally, which added considerably to the prosperity of the venture.

The performances of "The Trojan Women" in December proved that the Players have a following for tragedy, for, like "Measure for Measure," it more than paid the cost of production and the running expenses. "Julius Caesar," in the Christmas holidays, of course, was a success—almost sufficient to pay for any failure that might occur during the latter part of the season.

In February they gave their most interesting experiment, Dryden's "Marriage à la Mode" (see page 125). This delightful comedy has not been played on the public stage since the eighteenth century. Its popularity may be due to its naughtiness, but it is more probable that the Maddermarket Theatre is becoming a real and established part of the life of the citizens—a movement that the city are proud to show to its distinguished visitors.

W. N. M.

THE BOURNEMOUTH DRAMATIC AND ORCHESTRAL CLUB

The Club opened its seventh season in September with a membership of about six hundred. "At Homes" (three performances of each) have been given during the last weeks of each month as follows: September, "The Truth about Blayds," by A. A. Milne; October, "A Bill of Divorcement," by Clemence Dane; November, "She Stoops to Conquer," by Oliver Goldsmith; January, "The Lilies of the Field," by J. Hastings Turner.

In December, in place of the usual "A Home," the Club gave public productions of "A Bill of Divorcement" and "Tilly of Bloomsbury" (two performances of each) at the Theatre, as a result of which over £100 was handed over to local charities.

Members of the Club were invited to assist Dr. Charles Doran's production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at the Theatre, and also to broadcast "The Witness for the Defence" (presented at one of last season's "At Homes") from the local station, 6BM.

The programme for the remaining "At Homes" of the season includes: February, "Brown Sugar," by Lady Arthur Lever; March, "Daddies," by Alan Monkhouse; "Barbara's Wedding," by Sir James M. Barrie; "Bombastes Furioso," by W. B. Rhodes; May, "The Professor's Love Story," by Sir James Barrie.

TEMPLE PLAYERS

On Saturday, February 13, this Society completed a week's production of H. V. Esmond's comedy,

"Billy's Little Love Affair," at the Prince of Wales's Theatre at Rugby.

It has been admitted on all sides that this Society has again scored another success, both from the playing and financial point of view. The opinion of the local Press and the general comment has been that the performance is quite the best amateur production seen in Rugby of recent years. The play was bright and witty and the acting reached an exceptionally high level. The complete absence of self-consciousness, extremely good articulation, natural movements, and smooth working brought forward some ten to twelve letters of congratulation from prominent citizens of Rugby.

The company considered that the best award that could be given to their amateur producer, Mr. S. S. Bagshaw, for the untiring patience displayed by him while coaching the cast throughout the rehearsals, was to work hard and do their best during the week of production, the result being a signal success.

The financial success was largely due to the economical activities of the business manager, Mr. W. H. Cluett.

It was generally agreed that considerable assistance had been obtained from the Librarian of the British Drama League during play-reading, and this was greatly appreciated.

P. H. R.

THE MALGO DRAMATIC SOCIETY

The Malgo Dramatic Society, membership of which is for the most part confined to the staff of the Kent County Council, was founded four years ago with the avowed object of producing plays of more permanent value than those usually seen in a town like Maidstone. The Society takes pains to make it clear that its performances are not in aid of any charitable enterprise, but that its sole aim is to present fine plays in as worthy a manner as its personal and financial resources allow. The principal productions have been "Major Barbara," "The Admirable Crichton," and "Pygmalion."

For the annual production this year, on February 22, 23, and 24, in the Corn Exchange, Maidstone, the Society gave Galsworthy's "The Pigeon," preceded by Roland Pertwee's amusing skit, "Postal Orders."

"The Pigeon," interesting and provocative play though it is, is by no means an easy one for either actors or audience; but the infinite care of every detail, which has always been the outstanding note of this Society's work, brought the play to a high pitch of success.

As in previous years, practically the whole of the production was carried out within the resources of the members themselves without enlisting professional help. The scenery was specially made from designs of the Maidstone School of Art, and this, combined with the very remarkable lighting installation carried out by the Physics Department of the Maidstone Grammar School, produced a beautiful setting.

The entire production, as in former years, was under the experienced direction of Mr. G. E. Dean, whose masterly rendering of the part of Ferrand evoked the enthusiasm of the audiences and of the local Press.

NEWS FROM NORTH AND SOUTH

ST. PANCRAS PEOPLE'S THEATRE

During Lent plays of a religious intention are given at this little theatre in Tavistock Place, attached to the May Ward Settlement. Among the plays produced have been two cycles from the "Little Plays of St. Francis," by Laurence Houseman. The general standard of acting is remarkably good, and the stage management excellent. In Mr. Maurice Evans, who played St. Francis, the company is lucky in drawing upon the services of a young actor of distinguished promise. One also notices with satisfaction the large local audiences which assemble regularly on Thursday and Saturday evenings.

BRISTOL

The Folk House Players are to be congratulated upon yet another good performance. The plays they have selected have always been chosen for their artistic and educational value.

Following Gilbert Murray's "Andromache," they have now presented "The Melting Pot," by Israel Zangwill. Those who know this fine play will appreciate its difficulties. To attempt it was ambitious; to gain the success that they did was an achievement of which any company might well be proud.

It is part of the author's intention to make his characters of widely different types and races; every part thus becomes a none too easy character study. It is a tough proposition for an amateur company to find the right people to fill these parts, especially that of the central figure, a boy musician, whom the dramatist has made the mouthpiece of most of his aspirations. Not only did the Folk House Players do it, but they did it really well, a success only gained by keenness and hard work, no little credit being due to the careful coaching of Mrs. F. W. Rogers.

It is a source of gratification that the scenery was designed and painted by members of the company.

WILMSLOW EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

The Arts Section of the Wilmslow Educational Society gave two very interesting private performances of "Iphigenia in Tauris" (by kind permission of Prof. Gilbert Murray) on February 10 and 11.

A feature of these performances was that all the parts were taken by women. As in many societies, the women outnumbering the men, an experiment was tried of making the cast entirely feminine. This proved highly successful.

"Iphigenia" was played to curtain settings with the addition of four pillars, a small altar, and steps. The play was produced, the staging and lighting arranged, and the costumes made by members of the Society.

"THE STORY OF TOBIT"

The Guildhouse Players recently gave an interesting and original performance of "The Story of Tobit," taken from the Apocrypha. The Story,

which was adapted for the stage by Miss Pailthorpe and Miss Rock, was mimed in the mediæval fashion. The players were dressed in mediæval costume, and acted simply and clearly in dumb show what the reader bade them do; and Miss Maud Koydon, the reader, was sitting at one side of the stage and reading the essential parts of the story from a large volume by the light of two candles.

This very apt rendering gave the audience a glimpse of the mediæval simplicity in mingling fun and piety, and the beautifully designed settings and costumes helped to make an exceedingly attractive tableau, full of colour and movement.

THE MADGE ATKINSON SCHOOL OF NATURAL MOVEMENT, MANCHESTER

High praise can be sincerely given to the *live* "Moving Pictures" presented in the ballets and dances by Miss Madge Atkinson and Miss Mollie Suffield at their special Saturday matinee during Manchester's Opera Festival Week for charity. The dances were one long succession of dainty numbers—pictures grave and gay—of love and light and laughter, such things, indeed, as "dreams are made of."

In a Fairy Fantasy (with Miss Atkinson as Titania and Miss Winifred Furniss as Oberon), a Harlequinade, "By the Pool" (in which the four figures might have stepped from a study by Laura Knight), and in a "Dream Ballet" the little dancers flitted hither and thither most delightfully.

The more important ballets from the operas given through the week were excellently carried through at this performance, and suffered little from the lack of their conventional atmosphere. In the Delilah ballet the dancers captured the wild abandon of the Bacchanale, and showed later their adaptability in the gay Bohemian Costume Ballet from "The Fair Maid of Perth." The Hebridean Overture, danced to the music of Mendelssohn's "Fingal's Cave," and with Miss Atkinson herself again as the central figure, was in point of grouping and artistic effect one of the loveliest numbers. In this the movements of the dancers symbolized the ebb and flow of the tide and the winds passing to and fro on the surface of the waves. It was a picture beautifully conceived, as, indeed, were they all.

The ballets and dances were accompanied by the Hallé Orchestra and, in one or two cases only, by Mr. John Wills at the piano. L. H.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, LONDON, DRAMATIC SOCIETY

This Society will give three performances of the "Mask and the Face," by C. B. Fernald, at the College, on March 20, 22 and 23. Tickets (reserved 3s. 6d. and 2s. 4d., unreserved 1s. 2d., tax included) are now on sale, and may be obtained on application to Mr. R. J. Budlin, University College, Gower Street, W.C.1.

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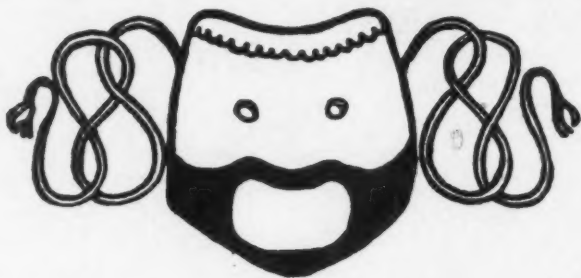
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St. John Ervine, in The Observer, 1925.

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